# "No, we jus' dey gist":
Polylanguaging, Metrolingualism
and African Youth Languages

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Abstract

The study of African youth languages (AYLs) has seen a few conceptual shifts and portrayals, reflecting their dynamicity, diversity, and fluidities. In these contexts, AYLs have been described as constituted by codeswitching/mixing, and as restrictive practices with links to ingroup or marginalized identities. This paper is oriented towards an emic view of AYLs, of what the speakers perceive themselves as doing, particularly in ecologies where codeswitching remains the dominant norm. I draw on naturalistic samples of Nigerian youth languages to illustrate the nature of codeswitching/mixing, linguistic innovation, and ethno-lingual practices within the frames of polylanguaging and metrolingualism. A metrolingual view of youth languages points to their fluidity and everydayness, rather than treating them as exotic phenomena of ingroupness or adversarial goals, while polylanguaging represents a shift from the sense of language mixing to the complex fashion in which speakers make use of diverse repertoires for communicative intents. I argue that both notions broadly explain the sociolinguistic typicalities of AYL practices – and that they subsume seemingly disparate concepts in youth language theorizing.

Keywords: African youth languages; metrolingualism; polylanguaging; codeswitching/mixing; fluidities; Nigerian youth languages
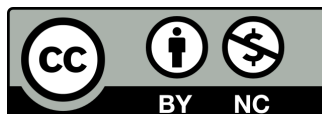
About the author

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Acknowledgements

1 Introduction

The study of African youth languages has blossomed in recent decades, with insights into their structure and social import. From the angle of structure, terms like codeswitching, language mixing, multilingualism, linguistic hybridity, and non-translation have been employed to describe the usual fusion of codes from diverse language origins (Ogechi 2002; Githinji 2006). Of these, the concept of codeswitching is perhaps the most frequently referred to, especially in the study of multilingual strands of youth languages (Mesthrie 2008; Oloruntoba-Oju 2018, among others). Code-switched speeches are considered to be those in which the speaker switches between languages or makes use of features from different languages during an interaction (Lehiste 1988; Myers-Scotton 1993). The nature of codeswitching in AYLs is, however, not so straightforward – and can be more than mere oscillation between codes of different languages. In most AYLs, codeswitching also manifests as relexicalization or re-semanticity, a process by which old words become loaded with new meanings (Githinji 2006; Mesthrie 2008; Isiaka 2018; Hurst-Harosh 2019). It also involves style-shifting (Isiaka 2020), as well as metaphorization (the creation of non-standard meanings) – a sort of meaning *switching* that is more of degree than of kind (Slabbert and Myers-Scotton 1997; Orman 2013). A more nuanced concept of codeswitching is that of Auer (1995, 116), who defines it as the "contiguous juxtaposition of semiotic systems, such that the appropriate recipients of the resulting complex sign are in a position to interpret this juxtaposition as such". Auer's emphasis on *semiotic systems* rather than "different languages" mirrors the forms of translingual practices I have observed in Nigerian youth varieties and underpins the understanding of codeswitching discussed herein.

This paper considers an emic view of youth languages by exploring practices in which codeswitching/mixing constitutes the norm, and in which speakers are least aware of oscillating between languages or different codes but adjudge themselves as just *gisting*. To this end, I advance the notion of polylanguaging (Jørgensen 2008; Jørgensen et al. 2011) to highlight the naturalness of multilingual practices in modern, streetwise youth languages, and metrolingualism (Otsuji and Pennycook 2010) to explain the transethnic dimension of youth languages in densely multiethnic spaces. I show that these two notions are complementary and are broadly subsumptive of seemingly disparate concepts in AYL theorizing.

2 Towards conceptual adequacy

The majority of early works involving surveys of key youth varieties across Africa have portrayed them as mainly urban phenomena with links to marginality, ingroupness, resistance identity, and antilinguistic behaviours. The "anti" view of AYLs has long been in the foreground and has drawn on Halliday's concept of "antilanguages" (Halliday 1976) to describe practices that sit ill with valorized language norms (for example, see Stone 2002; Makhudu 1995; Kießling and Mous 2004). They have thus been described as consisting mainly of slangs (Mojela 2002; Mesthrie 2008; Beck 2010), new languages, urban lingua franca or emerging creoles (Msimang 1987; Ntshangase 1993; Makhudu 2002), group-centred shibboleths (Githinji 2006), and informal, male-dominated varieties (Mesthrie 2008; Brookes and Lekgoro 2014). Youth languages also involve a host of non-verbal or performative repertoires, including gaits, gestures, greetings, clothing styles, and other forms of para-lingual behaviours that are indexical of youthfulness, camaraderie, conviviality, and ingroupness (Hurst 2009; Brookes 2014; Isiaka 2020). Studies have also applied the matrix-frame model, in the context of which AYLs have been analyzed as structurally "parasitic" on their matrix languages or constituted by codeswitching – given

the fact that they draw lexical inputs and other linguistic resources from different languages (Slabbert and Myers-Scotton 1997, 325).

Recent studies on AYLs have pointed to their fluidity and shown them to be a continuum of practices that are developing into urban vernaculars and becoming emblematic of popular culture (Mesthrie 2008; Nassenstein and Hollington 2015; Githiora 2018; Isiaka 2020). As youth languages expand, they spread among non-primary speakers and mix with mainstream varieties, thus becoming less marginal or restricted to ingroups. Globally, and particularly in Africa, the increasing demographic of young people, coupled with the social validation and globality of youth cultures, makes youth languages all the more appealing, even to non-primary speakers. The multiplicity of definitions points to the dynamicity of AYL practices, and more crucially, prompts the need for conceptual subsumption. Put differently, it behooves current endeavours to bring together these seemingly disparate portrayals under more resourceful meta-frames to better explain their structural fluidity and sociolinguistic functions. There is also a need for movement from artefactualization or the *bird's eye* view of youth languages to a more processual understanding of what youth language speakers actually do or perceive themselves as doing in interactional contexts (see also Nassenstein, Hollington and Storch 2018). This paper orients to this perspective by looking at samples of conversation among young Nigerians, with a focus on how the instances of linguistic creativity, codeswitching, translingual practices – and their concomitance with social belonging – coincide with polylanguaging and metrolingualism. These concepts thus provide much stronger grounds for explaining the fluidity of youth language practices that have emerged in such superdiverse contexts as Nigeria, and more generally, for illuminating the paradoxical dimensions of youth languages with regard to ingroupness and openness, temporality and permanence, local and globalized registers, and their coincidence with de-ethnicity against the backdrop of multilingualism and multiethnicity.

3 Metrolingual, polylingual notions of African youth languages

Following from a view of a language as not so much a purely homogeneous unit, recent thinking in sociolinguistic research is shifting focus from how language codes are switched or mixed towards closer readings of how language boundaries and distinctions result from social belongings (Maher 2010; Heyd 2016; Hurst-Harosh 2019; Pennycook 2017). This has implications for AYLs that have long been explained through the lenses of codeswitching and language mixing. We see, in these practices, the tendency to transgress language boundaries, and that speakers do not often restrict themselves to a matrix system or an embedded language but employ a range of inputs from multiple varieties – some of which they barely know beyond a few words. Metrolingualism represents a conceptual shift from the sense of bi/multilingual switching or mixing to the complex fashion in which speakers exploit and deploy the diversity of linguistic repertoires at their disposal and provides a broader ground for looking at the inventive use of language features, including stylized deviations and the production of identities across space and time (Otsuji and Pennycook 2010). Most AYLs evolved in densely multilingual settings where the lingua franca or the national languages co-exist with an array of ethnic tongues. Youth languages in these contexts contribute to the blurring of ethnolinguistic borders through cross-linguistic borrowing. Youths of diverse ethnic roots make use of shared features, insofar as they allow them to sound urban, cool, or sophisticated.

A metrolingual notion of language practices resonates with polylanguaging – in the sense of languages as unbounded systems, and linguistic features as fundamental to our understanding of multilingual practices in superdiverse settings. Polylingualism illuminates the

emic nature of language use in which speakers draw on the resources of different languages at their disposal for interactional goals, and hence is less oriented to the plurilingual logic of codeswitching/mixing. The application of polylanguaging in youth language research is not new. Jørgensen (2008) and Møller (2008) first used the term in their studies of speaking styles among young migrants in Denmark, and it has since been applied to language practices in superdiverse settings (see Otsuji and Pennycook 2010; Jørgensen et al. 2011; Blommaert and Backus 2013). Like metrolanguaging, polylingualism represents a movement from the idea of "languaging" towards a feature-based view or the use of features of different language origins in a conversation, including those the speaker finds meaningful, regardless of whether they are of any known language origin or not. Polylanguaging thus typifies those frequent scenarios in which a speaker who uses features of different languages in a conversation is indeed unaware of switching or mixing between languages. Møller (2008, 218) explains:

> What if the participants do not orient to the juxtaposition of languages in terms of switching? What if they instead orient to a linguistic norm where all available linguistic resources can be used to reach the goals of the speaker? Then it is not adequate to categorise this conversation as bilingual or multilingual, or even as language mixing, because all these terms depend on the separatability of linguistic categories. I therefore suggest the term polylingual instead.

While some tenets of polylanguaging mirror the nature of youth languages and the forms of language practices in multilingual spaces, it is crucial to point out its key conceptual position, with which this paper disagrees. Most arguments for polylanguaging or translanguaging[1] (and codeswitching/mixing) have questioned the idea of *named languages* (Otheguy, Garcia and Reid 2015, 286), and have argued against the view of languages as linguistic realities (see also Harris 1990; Mignolo 2005; Makoni 2012). Implied in such views is the understanding of languages as sociocultural constructs or as "inventions of social, cultural and political movements", thus seen as byproducts of national ideologies (Heller 2007, 1). Named languages, they contend, lack linguistic definition, and cannot be regarded as linguistic objects (Jørgensen et al. 2011; Otheguy, Garcia and Reid 2015). Following from this thinking, there have been efforts to treat languages as clusters of features with no linguistic borders or mental differentiation in the speakers' minds. Another approach involves a call to restore the pre-colonial awareness of languages, especially in African and Asian milieus, where languages are believed to have existed without names and not as "neat, bounded units" prior to the colonial projects of invention and geolingual redrawing (Makoni 2012, 190). The goal, therefore, is "to work towards the disinvention of language in order to be able to reconstruct a way of doing language studies" (Pennycook 2004, 6). A number of integrationists have, in fact, disputed the idea of languages altogether, and demanded the rethinking of its key assumptions (e.g., Harris, 1990, 45). They argue that linguistic assumptions such as structural complexity and systematicity are fundamentally obstructive to the speakers' awareness of a language as an emergent social system in communicative processes or everyday interactions.

Taking a less radical stance, while the idea of language as a social process and its structure as emergent in communicative events is quite useful and can be descriptive of the fluid

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[1] The understanding of 'translanguaging', which dispenses with the notion of 'languages', 'codes', and codeswitching (see Otheguy, García and Reid 2015), has been critiqued by Auer (forthcoming), who considers most of its argument as misrepresentative of what it sets out to explain.

nature of youth languages in multilingual contexts, it is essential to note that speakers who use diverse codes in conversations are aware that "languages" do exist, and that these languages have "names" and linguistic boundaries alike. The question, however, is whether or not they perceive themselves as "switching" between these languages while drawing features/codes from them. It is possible for bi-/multilingual speakers who frequently switch between different languages to let go of the distinction between the language systems, resulting in a mental convergence between them, and their awareness of such a convergent system is new and independent of their linguistic origins (see also Sebba 2009). It is thus possible for such speakers to become less sensitive to the languages as distinct systems. As in the cases of most code-switched Nigerian languages, a prolonged pattern of codeswitching could fossilize, thereby blurring the linguistic borders and yielding what is no longer perceived as a code-switched speech, but a way of speaking. In the samples below, it becomes evident that even though codes from different languages may be manifested in a conversation, this can be less obvious to the speakers, who in fact do not perceive themselves as codeswitching or mixing different languages, but as just *gisting* (chatting).

4 Analysis of data

In this section, I illustrate the concepts of polylanguaging and metrolingualism with excerpts from casual conversation among two groups of friends. Excerpt 1 comes from a conversation between three interethnic young Nigerians who were university undergraduates at the time: Shegzy Yoruba (male), Bright Urhobo (male), and Tina Ebira (female). Shegzy and Tina were already working for their university radio as Duty Continuity Announcers and programme presenters. Bright was into celebrity styling and appeared to have a knack for fashion design. The talk was about general happenings in Nigerian hip hop music, its creativity, style, and surging popularity before zeroing in on a couple of recently 'trending' slangs (e.g., *smelos* and *frosh*). The trio were relaxing in front of the Students' Union Building (where students sit to have snacks or chat during lecture-free hours). One of the students (Shegzy) and I had been co-members of a local church. I asked if I could record them and they indulged me. To mitigate the Hawthorne effect (speaking unnaturally as a result of being observed), I kept the recording device out of sight while I also joined in by smiling and occasionally adding words to the *gist*. In the excerpts, the translation of each turn follows in square brackets [] where necessary. English is in italics, Pidgin is in plain text, slangs and local languages are in bold face, and high-pitched utterances are in small caps:

Excerpt 1a

Shegzy:	= *We have the Remedies, then T. T.*
Tina:	Uhm:: =
Bright:	= *and Idris Kazeem* =
Tina:	and di shigidiwigidi: only God know wetin im dey talk
Shegzy:	As in those guyz eh
Tina:	*Now where are they?*
Bright:	Dem don **wongbolo** ((laughs))
Shegzy:	Wetin da wan mean? Dey don **wongbolo**?
Bright:	((laughs)) As in say dey don finish, dem no dey, dey don disintegrate, dey don **kpuf** ((laugh))

Translation:	[It means they are finished, they don't exist anymore, they have disintegrated, they are dead].
Shegzy:	*Alright, now I want you guys to differentiate these guys in two, e:m:* **smelos** *and the* **frosh**. Who be the **smelos** and who be the **frosh**?
Bright:	((laughs)) **Smelos—smelos** na people wey dey smell na, wey no get **package**
Translation	[((laughs)) Smelos—smelos are people who are smelling, who have no appeal]
Tina:	How you take know say dem dey smell?
Translation:	[How do you know that they smell?]
Bright:	Definitely na—*from the word "**smelos**"*
Tina:	People wey no get **swag**, wey no dey **jive** =
Translation:	[people without finesse, who don't socialize]
Bright:	**Dem low**—*lowlife, lowlife people.*
Tina:	= then the **frosh** be dem people wey package (.) wey **arra:nge**, people wey **gather**
Translation:	[= then the frosh are the well-heeled (.) folks who look well-arranged and attractive]
Shegzy:	You know say even those **frosh** guys (.) many times na dem dey lie pass. Dem no get nothing, na dem dey package their life. Na dem go go bend-down-select SELECT!
Translation:	[You know that even those frosh guys (.) many times are liars. They have nothing yet they look good. They go to second-hand shops to pick hand-me-downs, pick!]
Tina:	SELECT ((laughs))
Bright:	Na **normal dose** na (.) you know Nigerians na ((laughs))
Translation:	[That is the normal thing (.) you know that's who Nigerians are ((laughs))]

The recording began at the point when Shegzy added two names to the list of once-renowned Nigerian hip hop artistes. Bright also added a name of an artiste, whom Tina linked to a famous nonsense rap lyric (*shigidiwigidi*). Tina then asked where a particular band had been lately, and Bright replied: *Dem don wongbolo. Wongbolo* was entirely new to Tina, prompting its definition by Bright as *finished*, *non-existent*, *disintegrated*, or *kpuf* ('dead'). In the turns that followed, Shegzy asked his two friends whom they would see as *the smelos* or *the frosh* – and got a range of meanings. Bright defined *smelos* as the smelly people and extended it to "*people without appeal*". Tina gave a somewhat metaphorical meaning of *smelos* as *people wey no get swag, wey no dey jive*. Further meanings were added by Bright, and this time, he defined *the smelos* as *Dem low – lowlife, lowlife people*. The *frosh*, Tina continued, are well-heeled persons who are always neat-looking and attractive (*dem people wey package (.) wey arra:nge, people wey gather*). At this point, Shegzy cut in to note that "froshness" can be deceptive and described *the frosh* as mostly wannabes who can barely afford the originals of their designer clothing. In other words, *the frosh* also include poor folks who pretend to be rich, who go about dressed in hand-me-downs and replicas bought in second-hand stores (*Dem no get nothing...Na dem go go bend-down-select, SELECT*).

The chat features a range of lexical strategies, including slangs (e.g., *package, normal dose, swag, arrange, gather, jive,* etc.), overlexicalization or meaning proliferation (as in diverse synonyms for *smelos*), coinages (*smelos*, *frosh*), indigenized repertoires (*bend-down-select*, *small pickin*), a pidginized variant of double negation (*Dem no get nothing*), and Americanisms (as in Tina's glottalization of WHARISDAT in Excerpt 1b below). The elements are

typical of AYLs and are by no means unique to Nigerian varieties. They constitute the core grid of lexical liberality in youth language practices and linguistic strategies that have been ascribed to antilanguages, ingroupness, or resistance identity (Kießling and Mous 2004, 313; Githinji 2006, 457; Mesthrie, 2008, 98). This, however, seems not to be the case in the chat. With reference to meaning proliferation and relexicalization, the speakers seemed rather to be engaged in language play – unconstrained by conventional meanings or known semantic frames they spoke the way they did for the fun of sounding cool, youthful, or sophisticated.

In excerpt 1b. Shegzy further interpreted *frosh* as folks who go to great lengths to make their dress look crisp with homemade starch. Tina followed on with a rather gendered definition of *smelos* as reckless seducers, young males who lack common decency and wooing skills. She went on to blame *the smelo boys – small pikin dem* ('bloody urchins') for the irksome sexts that had recently been sent to her phone.

Excerpt 1b

Shegzy:	((laughs)) Na dem dey make cassava dey expensive now ((laughs)), na dem dey use am starch cloth, the tin go stand ((laughs)). Dem go come dey go.
Translation:	[That's why cassava has become expensive now ((laughs)). They are the ones who use it to starch their clothes to make them crisp and stylish ((laughs)). Then they go prancing around].
Tina:	No no! Mey I give you the example of guys wen be **smelos**: I sleep, JÉJÉ M JÈJÉ MI O, I wake up JÉJÉ M JÈJÉ MI, I **shecki** my phone, *and what am see* ((quoting and sensationalizing the text message)): 'It is big, it is fussy, it is hard ( )'. Please wetin e dey talk about?
Translation:	[Let me give you the example of guys who are smelos: I slept very calmly, and when I woke up very calmly and I checked my phone, guess what I saw((quoting and dramatizing the text message)): 'It is big, it is fussy, it is hard ( )'.Please, what's he talking about?]
Bright:	Nain be say: 'don't get the wrong idea, I am jus' giving you a big cock' ((laugh)).
Translation:	[That's to say 'don't get the wrong idea, I am just giving you a big cock']
Tina:	Now, WHARISDAT?
All:	((laugh))
Shegzy:	Well, you get that a lot from all these your people that follow you =
Tina:	= FROM **SMELO** BOYS — *SMALL PIKINS DEM*
Translation:	[= FROM SMELLY BOYS — ALL SMALL KIDS]
All :	((laugh))

The speakers at this point appeared to have settled into the chat, as they were now using more indigenized features from the Nigerian linguistic market, including elements of Nigerian Pidgin (NP), Yoruba, and local slangs. The opening lines began in English before dissolving into NP, and thus paved way for the predominance of Campus Pidgin (CP) in subsequent turns. It is important to note a categorial difference between this form of Pidgin, used in the chat, and the more conventional NP. In a previous study on Nigerian youth languages, I made a distinction between what is often referred to as Nigerian Pidgin and what I describe as Youth Pidgin or Campus Pidgin. I point out that even though they are structurally similar, CP is marked with profuse Anglicisms and "a wide range of lexical strategies, including neologism, clipping, blending, initialism, functional conversion and relexicalization" (Isiaka 2020, 74).

The words *smelos* and *frosh*, presumably derived from "smell" or "smelly" and "fresh", are etymologically traceable to English, but with additional connotations that are meaningful to the speakers or audience within the conversational context. Similar observations can be made for relexicalised words like *package, normal dose, swag, arrange, gather, jive* and *cock*. Relexicalization is a show of lexical liberality, a process by which words are assigned to new semantic fields and opened up to ambiguity. The words become loaded with additional, context-defined meanings. As also noted in Sheng, Swahili or English words which assume new referential meanings in Sheng "cannot be regarded as Swahili or English, but Sheng words" (Githinji 2006, 447).

A question that arises is whether it is tenable to define such instances as codeswitching. The first step in addressing this question would be to determine which items belong to which language, and specifically, the languages involved in the 'switching'. With reference to our sample, it becomes tricky to decide where most of the features belong, and especially where the words *kpuf* and *wongbolo* (which are not associated with Yoruba, English, or any known language) would go. Another is the question of how the speakers perceive their own practices: whether they see themselves as markedly 'switching' between languages or just *gisting* (a word for 'chatting'). I asked the speakers during a post-hoc interview whether they were conscious of mixing features from different languages, and the answer was: "No, we jus' dey gist" ('No, we are just chatting'). They do not conceive of what they are doing as switching between languages or different codes. A way to bridge this gap would be to think of the chat as comprising features that are governed by the interactional contexts, or as a way of speaking among predominantly young people, unimpeded by language borders or the prevailing strictures of any language rules. Jørgensen describes this kind of language practice as "polylingual languaging" – language users drawing on "whatever linguistic features (including lexis, syntax, morphology, phonology) are at their disposal to achieve their communicative aims as best they can, regardless of how well they know the involved languages…and whether or not the features are perceived by some speakers as not belonging together" (Jørgensen 2008, 163). In such cases, the harmony of the features used depends on the contexts of interaction, and the speakers are often well aware of this. While this form of languaging has been cited in arguments against named languages (see Jørgensen et al. 2011; Otheguy et al. 2015), what is also exemplified is the inability of codeswitching to account for the use of features that are not related to any known language.

Polylanguaging is a rational process, with its own kind of rules to which *polylanguagers* conform. The awareness of what fits and what does not can be automatic, and it is within such frames that the speakers make linguistic choices. In Excerpt 2 for instance, the use of *wongbolo* was promptly queried by Shegzy, who heard the word as odd; Bright, in an effort to drive home its meaning, provided a list of synonyms, including a noticeably new word "kpuf". If successful, such a word might 'trend' and become entrenched in the youth lexicon, or spread further to wider speaker communities.

Although the discussion has so far highlighted the instances of polylanguaging, they can equally be read as metrolingual practices, looking at the use of a diversity of linguistic features, the social awareness of speakers' behaviours, the fluid use of language codes and of their connection to the speakers' identities (Auer 2005; Otsuji and Pennycook 2010). While the employment of a language style or the use of multiple features can be socially meaningful, or can convey certain social information about the speaker, this is not always the case. A speaker may draw on features associated with a particular ethnic group or community of practice without necessarily being a member. There are many instances of uninduced *switchings* where the use of certain features or styles is better explained by aesthetic requirements than by discursive

logic (see also Alvarez-Cáccamo 1990, 4; Isiaka 2018, 170). Codeswitching might also imply that the speakers' linguistic profile instances are those of speakers who sparsely employ the raw mix of repertoires that are available to them, i.e., making use of codes not natively theirs nor of their social grouping (see also Rampton 1995 on language crossing). However, I have observed among inter-ethnic Nigerian youths, for instance, that the use of cross-linguistic features is usually for interactional alignment rather than ethnic indexing. As in Excerpt 1b, the most obvious instance of switching to Yoruba was by a non-Yoruba speaker, Tina: *"No no! Mey I give you the example of guys wen be **smelos**: I sleep, JÉJÉ M JÈJÉ MI O, I wake up JÉJÉ M JÈJÉ MI, I SHECKI my phone, and what am see* ('No no! Let me give you the example of guys who are *smelos*: I slept very calmly, and when I woke up very calmly and I checked my phone, guess what I saw'). The fact that Shegzy and Bright, both Yoruba indigenes and proficient Yoruba speakers, were not the ones switching is interesting – a practice at variance with the ascription of codeswitching to bilingualism or ethnolingual membership.

Excerpt 2

Henry:	I beg e:m, wetin una tok for dese Chibok girls?
Translation:	[What would you say about these Chibok girls?]
Chioma:	Wey dem kidnap?
Translation:	[Who were kidnapped?]
Sola:	((scratching his head and hissing)) We::ll (.) ỌMỌ: dose girls me fee' pity for-dem o (.) me pity for dem sincerely. Everytin everytin I know say dem dey **bobo** us for Naija, yes dem dey bobo us, cos bros no go fi' jus tell me say im no know anytin abau dose girls (.) im no fi' tok ↑a:m (.) na bobo everytin dem go carry am go left an' right and at di end dem go dey say (.) e:m↑he **se kiní kan** ↓ìsèkinì **kàn** (.) na lie
Translation:	[((scratching his head and hissing)) We::ll (.) Dude, I feel pity for those girls. I feel pity for them sincerely. At the end of the day, I know they are just deceiving us in Nigeria, yes they are deceiving us, because the bros cannot say they don't know the whereabouts of those girls. They can't say that (.). It's all deceit, because after all is said and done, at the end of the day, they will say they ↑DID THIS AND THAT which are all lies.]
Henry:	**Sèbí** na wetin Fela tok (.) buh see e, wetin we go call dis one na? Se na politician arrangement we go call am ni (.) as we no dey military regime na? *In short*, I still dey talk am eh, I don tell my sister: ↑ÒGBÉNI, see, na **pákó** church wey dem use **PÁKÓ** pu togeda lai dis ((gesturing a make-shift shelter constructed with planks)) na mey you dey go now (.) I no wan hia say e get one convention wey dem dey do ( ) **kiní kan** convention (.) I beg o: I use God beg you, *just quietly be in your* house because as matter dey go now na crowd, anywhere wey crowd dey, and me as I dey now God know say, God see me as I dey *round up this my…* *wherever*(.) ỌMỌ na street tins o, pu one mey I join two mey e give me four ↑ỌMỌ na to **away sharp-sharp** (.) I no even care the **away** (.) even if na just Ghana IBI BÁÀYÍ BÁÀYÍ ( ).

Translation:	[BUT that's what Fela was saying (.) but you see, what do we call this one? Is it a political arrangement or are we under a military regime? In short, I am still saying it. I have already told my sister - that ↑FRIEND, see, those make-shift church buildings are places you should start attending. I don't want to hear that there is any big convention programme you are attending. I beg you in the name of God, start staying at home and away from crowds (to avoid attacks). And as I am now, God knows that as soon as I round off my studies, I will be devising just any means to get away from this country. ↑DUDE, I do not even mind the destination (.) even if it's Ghana—JUST ANYWHERE.]
Chioma:	Malaysia no good?
Translation:	[What about Malaysia]?
Henry:	*Anywhere but here, dat's my new motto now*, maybe na slogan I go call am sef.
Translation:	[Anywhere but here, that's my new motto now, maybe I should call it my new slogan.]
Chioma:	((smiles))

Excerpt 2 comes from a conversation between Henry (male), Sola (male), and Chioma (female), all between the ages of 25 and 30. They are all fluent in Pidgin and English, though they speak different mother tongues: Henry is Itsekiri, Sola is Yoruba, and Chioma is Igbo. The speakers were all in their third year on a bachelor's degree programme in the English language department. The chat centred on the rising spate of insecurity in the country. It was barely two months after the kidnap of over 219 schoolgirls from their sleep by insurgents in the town of Chibok, in northeast Nigeria.

Henry began by asking Sola and Chioma what they thought of the situation. Sola responded with sympathy for the victims: ọMọ: *dose girls me fee' pity for dem o (.) me pity for dem sincerely* ('Hey friends, I feel pity for those girls (.) I feel pity for them sincerely'). He wondered if the kidnap was a grand game of politics and doubted that the authorities were yet knew the victims' whereabouts: *I know say dem dey **bobo** us for Naija (.) dem dey **bobo** us*. ('I to know that they are hoodwinking us in Nigeria (.) yes, they are hoodwinking us'). *Bobo* is an infant pacifier of sorts which can also be a substitute for breast milk. To *bobo* therefore is to deceive, hoodwink, or distract attention from what ought to be focused on. Henry responded by recounting the safety tips he had recently given his sister in the wake of mass killings and terrorist attacks across the country, and then went on to explain his plan to migrate after completing his degree programme: ọMọ ***away sharp sharp** (.) I no even care the **away**, even if na just Ghana…* ('Hey guys, it's all about leaving immediately (.) I don't even mind if the destination is Ghana…'.) *Away* is a metaphor for countries outside Nigeria, and the reduplication *sharp sharp* denotes how quickly he hoped to leave Nigeria. His inclusion of Ghana in his options of *away* demonstrated his desperation to leave the country. Ghana shares borders with Nigeria and is thus not quite regarded as a 'foreign' country by many Nigerians; Henry, however, considers Ghana a distant haven from Nigeria.

Similar to the previous example, the chat contains elements of polylanguaging, as in the wide range of features from Pidgin, English, Yoruba, slang lexicon, etc. Henry's question began with *I beg*… which functions as the interjective 'So…', while Sola opened his response with a discourse marker, ọMọ (CHILD), the Yoruba equivalent of "DUDE" (see also Bucholtz 2009, 147 on "dude" as an interactional aligner). Apart from Chioma, who had little to say due to her disinterest in such politically charged topics, Henry and Sola both used quite a few slang words that were inserted into the Nigerian Pidgin (NP) frame, and Yoruba too. Apart from the use of

these diverse features, the speakers exhibited strong adherence to the phonological rules of the individual languages in the chat. They did not merely speak in Pidgin, Yoruba, and English, but also with matching enunciation. Examples include the elision of the final consonants in *fee'* 'feel', *fi'* 'fit', *jus'* 'just', *abou'* 'about', and *pu'* 'put'. Pidgin operates its own phonological constraints. Thus, people do not just speak Pidgin, they also 'sound' Pidgin. For instance, NP is usually marked with coda elision or clusterless codas and the monophthongization of otherwise diphthongal vowels (Elugbe 2004, 834; Isiaka 2020, 76). The speakers kept these rules. The phrase "*PÁKÓ church*" (*pákó* meaning 'plank' or 'wood beam' in Yoruba) denotes the make-shift church buildings of smaller congregations. Henry believed it would be unlikely for terrorists to target such places – which was why he recommended them to his sister for safety. He got a bit *streety* when he vowed to "pu one and join two to get four" (to devise any means possible to fund his migration from the country). "Away" in the chat functions both as a verb (to *away* 'migrate') and a noun (*I no even care the away...* 'I don't even mind the destination'). The closest cognate of such usage would be an "*away* match" in British football parlance. In English however, it is usually an adverb, but was recontextualized in the chat with a different semantic load to mean 'abroad' or 'destination'. Another example is *sharp sharp*, meaning 'very quickly' or 'smartly done'. Elsewhere, a similar instance has been reported where the word *fence-fence* means 'running away' in Tsotsitaal, upending its English meaning (Slabbert and Myers-Scotton 1997, 330). These items assume meanings and syntactic structures that are different from those they have in their source languages.

The excerpt features a hybrid practice, and calls attention to the dialogical representation of fluid and fixed practices, as demonstrated in the simultaneous violation and adherence to discursive norms, the use of glocalized repertoires, and the co-deployment of what Gumperz refers to as 'we-code' and 'they-code' Gumperz (1982, 66). We-code, in this case, represents features that are indexically linked to youth languages or peer codes for expressing solidarity, camaraderie, or conviviality, while they-code is comprised mainly of traditional features of mainstream languages. We see in the exchange between Henry and friends how this becomes evident, on the one hand, in their observance of normative conventions for Pidgin, and on the other hand, in the insertion of slang and forms of expressions that have roots in youth language practices.

We see also, in this chat, how the fluid use of words from different languages and the eloquence of English-proficient speakers in Nigerian Pidgin mirror the performative nature of youth language practices. Metrolingualism is a reconceptualization of hybridity, as pertaining to the embedding of fixity in predominantly hybrid practices (Otsuji and Pennycook 2010, 244). In other words, even though speakers tend to draw features from different language sources in the course of their interactions, there is often the echoing of prescribed language norms or pre-ascribed social identities within such fusions. For instance, an interesting point to note in Excerpt 2 is how the use of Yoruba becomes jointly indexical and de-indexical of the speakers' mother-tongue. Henry's use of Yoruba words, despite not being a native Yoruba or speaker of the language, signals de-ethnicity and his fluid alignment with the context of interaction; and it is likewise plausible to think of Sola's use of Yoruba words as indexical of his ethnic membership – which, taken together, reinforces the translingual nature of these practices as reflexively fluid and static.

5 Recap and final remarks

The African youth language phenomena are inherently diverse – in terms of both linguistic features and theories – and this is very much reflected in the literature. The array of portrayals is reminiscent of a folkloric visit of ants to an elephant, each of which saw the elephant, but left with differing accounts of what it looked like. In this paper, I have touched on some of these accounts, and have argued for the notion of polylanguaging as being more descriptive of youth language practices than codeswitching/mixing, and for metrolingualism as a meta-frame for conceptualizing the frequent use of multilingual resources for interactional goals among speakers in multiethnic spaces, and other sociolinguistic typicalities of AYLs. These concepts allow for a more productive understanding of African youth languages as essentially fluid and creative practices, beyond fixed linguistic borders or ethnolingual belongings. As noted by Otsuji and Pennycook (2010, 246), metrolingualism focuses on "languages as emergent from contexts of interaction" and on features or stylized repertoires. We see in the conversations how the speakers managed to achieve interactional goals through the seamless manipulation of features from diverse linguistic origins without being conscious of so doing, and from languages in which they are least proficient. While codeswitching may hint at bilingual competence, especially in the languages being *switched*, there is also the possibility that speakers playfully draw from the pool of linguistic features available to them, including those in which they lack competence or to which they do not ethnically belong. In the context of close interactions between languages, a prolonged pattern of switching could fossilize and blur language borders, thus yielding what is no longer perceived as codeswitching, but as a normal way of speaking. Youth languages in such ecologies may be perceived less as codeswitching varieties, and more as stylized exploitations of speakers' multilingual resources and as ways of sounding de-ethnic and cool. It is also worth noting that while most youth language practices tend to have elements that mark them off from more conventional languages, they are not as exotic or far removed from the mainstream. What we see, however, are mostly codes of known (and unknown) language origins, imbued with new meanings or syntactic functions – for indexing street-slickness, coolness, and for negotiating social belongings.

The *metro* notion of language practices coincides with metroethnicity, a term employed by Maher (2005) to describe the transgressive use of languages among young Japanese of diverse ethnic extractions. Maher conceives of metroethnicity as "a reconstruction of ethnicity: a hybridized 'street' ethnicity deployed by a cross section of people with ethnic or mainstream backgrounds who are oriented towards cultural hybridity, cultural and ethnic tolerance and a multicultural lifestyle in friendships, music, the arts, eating and dress" (Maher 2005, 83). As an extension of metroethnicity, metrolingualism refers to the nature of language use among speakers of mixed backgrounds, and the reflexive renderings of identities through language, and more generally, the use of features beyond the borders of "language, culture, ethnicity, nationality or geography" (Otsuji and Pennycook 2010, 246). The notions of polylanguaging and metrolingualism thus orient us towards the fluid conception of AYLs as symbiotic with conventional languages rather than as restricted to ingroupness or marginalized identities. They provide a stronger frame for explaining the inventive nature of youth languages, as well as the speakers' perceptions of their own practices, and the transethnic dimension of AYLs in multiethnic spaces. We see that although certain codes are socially meaningful or indexical of the speakers' identity, this is not always the case. Speakers may use language features associated with a particular ethnic group or a user-community without necessarily being a member, thus performing identities not really theirs. In excerpts 1a and 1b, for instance, it seemed quite

natural for Tina and Henry to draw ludically from the lexico-syntax of Yoruba, despite being non-speakers of the language. They were performing rather than "speaking" the languages, and thus translocated themselves beyond fixed identities and ethnolingual boundaries.

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